Helping Hands

By pandsal

Published on Lush Stories on 22 May 2009

A widower's odyssey of discovery

http://www.lushstories.com/stories/mature/helping-hands.aspx

Next month I shall be sixty-seven years old. Before then there will be the fifth anniversary of the day my darling Dorothy was taken from me. A merciful release, said people who had known of her illness; and so it was. I still think of her, of course, and that is why I cannot help feeling just a little guilty about the turn my life has taken in the intervening years.

Sex was never that important to Dorothy. At any rate, not once our early ardour had dwindled. And somehow I suppose I just adopted her way of thinking. There were stories in the papers about something they called 'the sexual revolution' but I never felt it applied to us. Certainly not as we grew older. Darby and Joan who used to be Jack and Jill, as the song puts it.

So how would Dorothy feel if she knew the things I get up to nowadays? If she can look down and see me ... in action, as it were, she would surely be scandalised at first; I hope she would come to realise that I have found a new way of life that is very good for me. Dorothy's memory is on my conscience, I have to admit, but I have to balance that against the excitement, the fulfilment that each new day promises. Thrills quite unlike any she ever experienced.

It all began quite quickly. Only a few weeks after the funeral I was in the garden at the front of my cottage tending my roses: there's a pale mauve variety, called Compassion, I'm fond of, and a yellow one called Apricot - that's a favourite, too. But it had been a terrible summer for greenfly. Sad, really, after all my hopes. I was contemplating the possibility of salvaging a few blooms for the village show when a car drew up with a sharp toot on the horn. I looked up to see The Major and his wife climbing out. Unwelcome visitors, I'm afraid, but in a small village one has to try to be polite.

His name is Frank Johnson but everyone calls him The Major. Sometimes, behind his back, The Mad Major. Quite short, sandy hair, straight back, barks a bit when he talks. I'd always thought him a bit of a bore with a tame wife but people say he means well. No one seems to know how long it is since he left the Army, or whether he saw active service. Doubtful, in my view. But he still plays the part. Gave me a little salute when I reluctantly invited them both indoors. No real option after he'd said there was something he wanted to talk about.

I offered tea or coffee. The Major said Brenda would like tea - she just nodded agreement - but he wouldn't mind a drop of scotch if that was possible. Neat would be fine, he said, when I offered water with it. By the time I returned from the kitchen with tea for his wife and me, his glass was empty. I didn't suggest a refill.

"So how are things?" he asked as I sat down.

"Oh, so-so. You know how it is."

"Yes," he said. "We do know how it is. That's why we called round."

Not knowing where this was leading, I said nothing.

"You're not the first, and you won't be the last. Village this size, lot of elderly folk. Not surprising, really."

"No," I said, bewildered about what was supposed not to be surprising.

"Bereavement. The dear departed. All that. You're by no means the only one."

That, at least, I could understand. Funerals hereabouts, I knew, were much more common than marriages or christenings. When Dorothy and I moved here in preparation for my retirement, the village had a population of under two thousand, and the figure has declined steadily. There used to be three public houses but now there are only two. There's a small general shop and a newsagent that also serves as a post office. The Church is served by a vicar who looks after four parishes and visits ours on alternate Sundays. Three times a week there's a bus service into the nearest town, twenty miles away. Barely enough even though we are an elderly, dwindling population.

"Yes," I said, remembering a number of solitary souls I sometimes encountered in the bar of my local.

"The important thing," the Major continued, "is not to mope. Get on with life. There's plenty of it out there. Do your own housekeeping, do you?"

"There's not a lot to do. I manage.:

"Do you cook?"

"Well, I'm no chef but I don't starve."

"Varied diet?"

"Oh yes," wondering where the inquisition was leading.

"Laundry?"

"I know how the washing machine works," I replied, smiling, fearing he might want to schedule a kit inspection.

"Ironing, though. Not many men your age are good at that." When I conceded as much, he went on, "Guessed as much. And that's where we come in. We've a good idea, Brenda and I, where the problems are and what the answers are. Sharing, for instance."

"Sharing?"

"Well, it's obvious, isn't it? There's more than one widow who'd be glad to do some ironing for someone who could tidy her garden."

"I suppose so."

"That's just one example. And there are plenty more. Brenda and I do a bit for Helping Hands - it's all voluntary. Our contribution, you could say. Think about it. You'll come up with lots of little ways we can help. And one big way." He paused and looked at his wife. "Do you want to take over, Brenda?"

To this point Mrs Johnson had participated only with the occasional nod. Now she said, "Well, no need to be shy, Mr Roberts." She leaned forward and put a hand on my arm. "May I call you John?"

"If you wish."

"The thing is, John, we know that a bereaved person who has had a happy married life misses one thing above all." She sat back and smiled. "It's sex, isn't it?"

Was it? I'd gone without for so long while Dorothy was ill I hardly gave it a serious thought. It hadn't been a priority when she was well. I didn't know what to say, so I said nothing.

"No need to be embarrassed. You're not the only one in this predicament but - like all the little things - we can help you." She looked to her husband.

The Major said, "Show him, then, Brenda."

"If I may, I'll just close the curtains first,"she said. "Never know who may be passing,do we?" Satisfied that we had the necessary privacy, she turned back towards me, unbuttoning the full length of the front of her dress as she approached. At that time she would have been in her late forties, a petite woman with greying hair arranged as an oval frame to a friendly face with wide, amber eyes. When she allowed her dress to fall open I could see she wore matching pink bra and knickers in a flimsy, lacy material. Her breasts were small and high, apparently needing little support. Her hips narrow, the legs slim. Undressed, she was transformed, no longer the anonymous partner without a personality of her own.

"Now," said the Major, "isn't that a bit tasty? If you just relax, she'll look after you. It's what she's good at."

To say I was thunderstruck is an understatement; it probably makes me sound very unworldly if I say I had never had an experience like it, but that is the simple truth. I simply wasn't prepared for a woman I scarcely knew stripping to her underwear in my own front room. While her husband looked on with obvious approval. But if my conscious mind struggled to come to terms with what was happening, my physical reaction was swift and inescapable: an erection of greater intensity than anything I had known for literally years.

Seeing the bulge, she stooped and let her hand rest in my crotch. "Oh my," she said, "we are in a bad way, aren't we? But that's nothing to be ashamed of. It's natural. And we can take care of it." With that she gently parted my legs, knelt between them and opened my zip. Whether or not I wanted to resist - and by then I'm not sure I did - was irrelevant. Within seconds my cock was in her hand and she was caressing it with cool, sensuous fingers.

"Excellent - little man at attention. Brenda knows how to get him to stand at ease. Won't mind if I do a little sentry duty, will you?" I looked to see that the Major, watching us with unblinking concentration, now had his exposed cock in his hand and was massaging it fiercely. Extraordinarily, I can recall being absurdly pleased to see that his member was in proportion to his short stature.

I wasn't allowed to dwell on the thought. The Major was issuing another order. "Go on, Brenda. You don't always get one as big as that. But be careful - you know what it's like when they've been without for a while."

Oh, Brenda knew. There's no doubt about that. Looking back, and knowing a lot more now than I did then, I can appreciate the skill she deployed so sympathetically for the next few minutes. Her head descended, her mouth opened and warm, voluptuous lips enfolded the knob of my cock. She

steadied herself, waited while I tried to control the demands of my testicles. Her tongue lapped the underside of my knob, just where the circumcision has left me so deliciously sensitive. Her head moved down again and suddenly most of my shaft - as much as she could accommodate - was wrapped around by the most subtle suction. My eyes met The Major's. The rhythm of his self-stimulation had not abated. "Try and hold on," he said. "I know it's not easy."

In fact, it was impossible. As Brenda drew her pursed lips up towards the head again, her hand was cupping my balls. I heard myself gasp, felt my groin push involuntarily upwards, and a surge of spunk erupted into Brenda's throat. Far from being repulsed, she tightened her lips around my detumescence. I felt her tongue lapping against me. Only when the last dropped had been squeezed out did she release me. "There," she said, dabbing at her mouth with a tissue, "Doesn't that feel better?"

"No need to ask," The Major chimed in. "It was what he needed and you did him proud. Didn't she?" turning to me.

Although I sensed it would be some time before I would really come to terms with what she had done, I had to concede it had been a virtuoso performance. "Well," he smirked, deftly stowing away his own still erect member, "that's Brenda Johnson for you. That's why in Aldershot they called her the best BJ in the garrison. But it's time we were running along. What you need to do now is come along to the next Helping Hands meeting. Elevenish, Tuesday morning. Village Hall. You probably won't get Brenda again - this was just a welcome to Helping Hands - but you won't go short. Believe me."

As they left, Brenda gave me a demure peck on the cheek but, unseen by her husband, her left hand ran across my crotch. I watched them get in their car and drive away.

****

There were eleven of us, seven women and four men, having coffee and biscuits in the Village Hall the following Tuesday morning. Some of the faces, having been seen around the village, were vaguely familiar but there was no one I knew. I guess the youngest - one of the women - would have been in her mid fifties. Twin sets and pearls weren't in evidence but they wouldn't have been out of place. There was a certain amount of grey hair, male as well as female. Conversation was spasmodic and superficial, spiced with a little gossip - could it be true that the new lady at the general shop was having an affair with the newsagent? No one knew.

It was puzzling. Was this really what the Mad Major and his sexy wife had in mind for me? I had hardly expected an orgy at eleven on a Tuesday morning, but this couldn't have been more decorous. Or, as far as I was concerned, more boring. For politeness, I stuck it out to the end. Then, as the

ladies were clearing up, a tall, well-built woman whom I had recognised as the church organist, Marjorie Wall, came over to enquire, "Is there anything you would like to take with you, Mr Roberts? There's always something left and we don't like to waste it."

"Well -"

"I can recommend the cream sponge - " she smiled - " because I made it myself."

Impossible, then, to refuse. And anyway I do have a sweet tooth. "Thank you," I said, "that's very kind."

"Not at all. I'll just pop it in a tin for you. I'm sure you'll enjoy it."

"Yes, of course."

"But do let me have the tin back, if you will. There's a label taped inside the lid with my address."

"Yes. I can bring it back this afternoon." I didn't want her to think me unappreciative.

"No, sorry, I'm at my yoga class this afternoon. This evening, perhaps. If that's all right with you."

So, shortly before seven I put the tin, now empty, in my saddlebag, and cycled round to Marjorie Wall's home. She lives in a large, rambling house that used to be the manse in the days when we had our own vicar. Her response when I rang the bell took so long that I was beginning to fear she was not at home, but no sooner had she opened the door than she was ushering me inside. My protestations that I had only come to return the tin, were brushed aside.

"Nonsense," she said, "come and have a drink. We should get to know each other better - I want to tell you how sorry I was to hear about your poor wife. I can sympathise - I lost my Cecil in similar circumstances. Nearly ten years ago but it only seems like yesterday."

She led the way into a large drawing room - chintz-covered furniture, a piano, some nondescript water-colours on the walls. She settled herself on a sofa and indicated that I should take the armchair facing her. "I would like to call you John," she said, 'and you must call me Marjorie. Informal, the way friends should be."

She was, I suppose, trying to put me at ease, but it wasn't easy and it was about to get more difficult. I had been surprised that she was wearing a floral housecoat when she welcomed me in, and the visit from the Johnsons lingered at the back of my mind, but it still left me unprepared for what happened

next: she let the housecoat fall open to reveal navy blue bra and knickers; a matching suspender belt supported patterned stockings.

My expression must have spoken for me because she said, "Please don't be embarrassed. I mean, you've had an introduction from Brenda and the Major, haven't you? So you know what this is about."

How slow she must have thought me, how naive not to have read the signs and guessed why I had been invited to visit her at home. I was still struggling to adjust when she went on, "We can talk later, if you like. I expect you've got lots of questions. But let's enjoy ourselves first. Do you want me here - we can use the couch? Or upstairs?"

Afraid of making a total fool of myself, I had to say something. The best I could offer was, "Why don't you choose?"

She jumped to her feet. "Upstairs, then," she said with such enthusiasm I must have made the right decision. "There's nothing like a nice big bed, is there?" She took my hand and half led, half dragged me to a bedroom on the first floor. There covers had been turned back on a large double bed. "No mirrors on the ceiling, I'm afraid but It's ready for us," she announced. "So let's use it." She stepped out of the housecoat, threw her substantial frame down and beckoned me to join her.

I stood at the side of the bed, still absurdly hesitant, by now wanting what was clearly on offer but unsure how to proceed. Fortunately, Marjorie continued to take charge. "Why don't you get undressed," she suggested, "while I get myself warmed up for you?" Her hand slipped inside the waistband of her knickers.

The sigh that accompanied the subsequent movement of her fingers under the fabric finally broke my paralysis. Wrestling with stubborn buttons, I stripped completely, scattering clothes wherever they fell. Absurdly, instinct took over as I attempted to cover my burgeoning stalk with one hand only to find that I had taken it in my grasp; it was as though I was holding it out for her inspection.

"Oh my!" she said. "You are going to be very popular around here. Let me feel." Taking a firm but careful grip, she encouraged me on to the bed at her side. All the while, her other hand moved inside her knickers. There was no point in pretending I wasn't aroused; for the first time in my life a voluptuous woman was offering herself to me in such blatant fashion that I was powerless to resist. However, when I rolled on to my side and reached for her, she held me at arm's length.

"Slowly, John. Don't spoil things by rushing - we have plenty of time. Can you undo my bra?"

Once the clasp was released, I could only admire the large round globes, the dark circles topped by

broad, flat nipples. Since then I have come to realise that my ultimate preference is for smaller, more oval breasts and pointed nipples but at that time I was a novice, still unaware of the multifaceted world of sensuality to which Marjorie could lead me. What I recall of that moment is applying my mouth and tongue to each orb in turn, licking and sucking, sucking and licking for a long time until she lifted my head to look into my eyes. Then the woman I had only known previously as the church organist, murmured, "Now I know how clever you are with your tongue, I think you should try somewhere else. So, if you would just slip my knickers off... "

She raised her hips to assist me. Her legs, freed from the garment, opened wide. In the same instant, her hand on the back of my head pressed my face into the warm darkness between. Fortunately, I was using my hands to steady myself; had I been holding my cock I think that would have put a swift end to the encounter. It's true that I had, many years before, gone down on Dorothy in this manner but she had never been comfortable with the idea of cunnilingus; although we never discussed it, I felt it tactful not to insist and after a while we fell back into less exciting endeavours.

Marjorie rekindled the spark. The aroma was slightly musky, the taste just a little salty. I pushed my tongue between the lips and licked. The pressure of her hand on the back of my head intensified, then relaxed. I felt fingers slide between her mound and my forehead, then movement. While I licked, she began to work her clitoris. I became aware of small muscle tremors on the inside of her thighs. Her hips bucked, her legs locked behind my back, her bottom lifted and fell as she worked towards her orgasm. My tongue sought to match her need and, however inexpertly, somehow it succeeded. A final, gasping paroxysm carried her over the edge to fulfilment.

For a while we lay in silence,my head resting on one of her ample thighs. At last she said, "John, you now know my secret: I love sex in all kinds of ways but nothing satisfies me more than a clever tongue."

I protested that my contribution had been insignificant beside her uninhibited demonstration of desire. "No, John," she said, "don't be modest. You were good and I loved every second. But we haven't finished. It's your turn now. And anyway, I want to feel you inside me. Is it still ready?"

Kneeling, I was able to show her that I was indeed still erect. A tiny tear of moisture was escaping from the tip. Marjorie licked it away before lying back, opening her legs and drawing up her knees. "Well, I'm sure I'm ready for you," she said. "But if you can, keep control. I want us both to enjoy it."

The advice was sound. After I had knelt between her legs and she had taken me in hand to guide me into her, there was an instant temptation to let nature take its course by the fastest route. Taking a deep breath and forcing my mind to put the messages from my groin on temporary hold, I pressed forward and held still. I was aware of the silky warmth of her inner walls surrounding my knob. I felt

the labia lips contract and tighten round the base of my cock, now buried to its full length. My balls were resting against her.

Whatever instincts or wishes Marjorie may have had, she held back until she felt the danger of a premature conclusion was at least minimally under control. When she started to move beneath me, it was with no more than a gentle surge, a ripple followed by a relaxation. And she began to talk to me, to teach me how to read her responses, how to indicate when I needed to ease away from the cauldron that was inviting me to tumble into its inviting flames. Her movements were infinitely subtle and varied. I had to remind myself that this was an outwardly respectable middle-aged woman in a somnolent English village, yet she was displaying all the wiles of an oriental courtesan. Probably memory exaggerates but that was how it seemed to me as gradually she increased the tempo, encouraging me all the while with little murmurs of approval and incitement.

The climax was all I could have desired. She let me know that all restraint should be abandoned. Her writhing against me grew fierce and demanding. Her mouth opened, sucking in deep breaths. Her hands clasped my buttocks, reinforcing the urgency of my driving penetration. And so the dam burst inside her. I felt the first gush, then the spasms as spurt after spurt emptied me. The relief was total and shattering. The feeling exquisite.

****

Half-an-hour later, showered and dressed I sat with Marjorie in a comfortable room downstairs. She again wore the housecoat but now decorously closed. I was nursing a large scotch and soda, Marjorie had a mug of coffee.

"The thing you have to understand about Helping Hands," she said in reply to my question, "is that it doesn't really exist. There's no organised body, no constitution, no secretary, no membership. If Helping Hands is anything it's a kind of code word that identifies anyone in the village who is single - or becomes single - and is over a certain age."

"Which is?"

"Oh, there's nothing fixed. It fluctuates. But we're not talking young. Or even youngish. The majority are widows or widowers. Without being brutal about it, you can say that whenever there has been a funeral in the village, discreet enquiries will be made. After a while, of course."

"And then?"

"Well, that too can vary. The whole Helping Hands thing depends on who's involved at any time. We

talk among ourselves, the women do, and we do what seems interesting and enjoyable. At present, I'm acting as a kind of meeter and greeter for anyone new. Like you."

"Doesn't sound too hard."

"You'd be surprised. You and I clicked and it was great. But that doesn't always happen. I've had disappointments. And one or two disasters."

"So what about us? Another time, I mean."

"Ah, that's important." She paused, considering. "Yes, I hope there will be more evenings like this one. But one thing that has always been part of Helping Hands philosophy is that no-one can monopolise anyone else. We've had a few cases of a man and a women hitting it off so well that they settle into being a couple. But then they disappear from Helping Hands because we are no longer what they need."

"I can see that. So what should I do now?"

"Nothing"

"Nothing?"

"Don't worry. The point I've been trying to get across is that in Helping Hands we circulate. Variety. Spice of life, eh? But experience has taught us that the initiative is best left in the women's hands. Men can get - well, pushy. We had one serious case and we had to tell him he wasn't welcome. He moved away."

She offered me a refill but I declined. I still had to cycle home and the evening had left me intoxicated enough. Taking my glass, she leaned down and kissed me; full on the mouth but not in away that suggested a resumption of engagement. "Just go home, John, and be patient. We women talk, you know. My guess is you won't wait long before your phone rings.

****

I didn't hear from her again for several months, though we smiled when we passed each other in the street. But in the meantime I was drawn into a world I couldn't have dreamt existed; certainly not in a sedate village like ours. And Marjorie was right. The revelatory thrill, especially for someone whose previous decades had been sheltered and unadventurous, was the variety. Obvious really, I suppose, but no two of these women were the same, or wanted the same things.

Audrey was unremarkable in appearance and quiet in manner. Sex was invariably missionary but unhurried and ultimately very satisfactory. When it was over, she always made me a cup of tea and sat and chatted for half an hour without ever referring to what had gone on in her bed.

In contrast, Vera was extrovert and beyond embarrassment. She was the one who surfed the internet and went mail order shopping for sex toys on behalf of several of the other women as well as herself. Without Vera I would never have known what a clever substitute for a man the Rabbit could be. Vera, who claimed she masturbated every day she didn't have what she called 'an appointment,' gave me a noisy demonstration. And still had appetite for a vigourous workout afterwards.

Masturbation was what Cynthia liked, that and nothing more. I found it strange the first time she suggested that we should sit in facing chairs and watch each other's handiwork. But there was a real erotic charge as she paced us, drawing out the pleasure until there could be no further delay. Simultaneous orgasm was always her objective and, with experience, we were able to achieve it more often than not.

Trudy was a novice when she called me the first time. She was one of a few divorcees who came into the circle. A familiar story, ditched by her husband shortly before her fiftieth birthday in favour of someone younger. I was the first name she was given by Marjorie who apparently told her I was "very big." This wasn't anything I'd ever given much thought to but I discovered, not only from Trudy, that it was one reason why my phone rang so regularly. Big or not, she climbed on top and rode me with the relish of someone making up for lost time. Sessions with Trudy were almost always exhausting.

Much the same was true of Edna. The difference,though, was twenty years: Edna was seventy, still going strong and proud of it. Her body was still in good shape and so was her vocabulary. "How are we going to fuck today?" was her customary greeting. Then she might suggest, "Why don't you have a look at my arse in my new knickers? Feel me up a bit and when your ready give me a bit of doggy." When I did, she would offer continuous encouragement. "Harder. Get it up me. That's good. Just the way I like it." I felt I had moved a long way from Dorothy. Edna passed away recently. Her funeral had a remarkable turnout of elderly men.

If Edna was something of a one-off, so too, in an entirely different way, was Connie. Terrified of what her neighbours might think, she was only an occasional caller, always wanting to know if I could visit at short notice. The reason was that she had seen the occupants from either side of her little terraced house leave the street. "It's safe if you come now," she would say. "I've been without for too long so please come if you can." Even then we would have to couple in virtual silence. "I wouldn't like it if next door came back and heard us," she'd say. These couplings were somewhat surreal but I never demurred. Because of the long intervals between what she felt were safe opportunities, when we got

down to it she was the most ravenous of partners, with a repertoire in which sixty-nine was a major feature.

There were others, the circle waxing and waning (and wanking), as some departed with the years and others were enlisted. One never knows how many of us there were at any given time. We are a constantly rotating community of temporary mix-and-match pairs. Only once, after the original coffee morning, did a number of us get together in a group. Freda organised a theatre trip to our nearest town.

I'm not much of a theatre-goer but the local repertory company were putting on something called 'Round and Round the Garden' by Alan Ayckbourn. I went along thinking it might appeal to my gardening interest. In the event, it turned out to be a comedy that had had very little to do with gardening but was mildly amusing. Much more interesting was the journey home.

We were in a sixteen-seater mini-coach. It was dark and there was only dim lighting in the coach. I was sitting with Alice making noncommittal conversation about the play when she nudged me to draw my attention to the couple across the aisle. Despite the subdued illumination, I saw that Vera was leaning down into Arthur's lap. The rise and fall of her head left little to the imagination. Alice smiled approvingly. Then she carefully folded back her skirt, took my hand and placed it firmly between her open legs. Her theatre-going outfit hadn't included any knickers. In time, clenched lips and a short sharp drive with her hips signalled a carefully managed orgasm. She pressed my hand in place while she recovered. Unfortunately, just as she was preparing to reciprocate, the coach driver announced that we were nearly back at the village. Alice let her disappointment show. "Next time," she murmured.

There never was another trip but Alice made up for that on several subsequent visits to her home, so I've no complaints. Indeed, these last five years have passed so swiftly I find it hard to recall the person I was before all this began. Without exception, all the women I have met in these circumstances have broadened my outlook in varying measure. I am grateful to them all. But none has excited me more than my recent experience with Teresa. And that demands recounting in some detail.

****

Teresa is - I guess - somewhere between fifty and fifty-five,slim and well-preserved. Where sex is concerned she undoubtedly ticks more of the boxes for me than anyone else. Black underwear, for a start. A taste for extended foreplay, too - there have been days when I have arrived in the early afternoon and left after dark, and we don't spend our time watching soaps. The television certainly gets switched on but Teresa subscribes to adult channels. One that features spanking movies is a

favourite and never fails to provoke a session with Teresa across my lap. One day, displaying my blossoming knowledge of the new world I have entered, I enquired about bisexuality. Specifically, female bisexuality. She said there was a lot of it about,more than most men supposed, but she was unforthcoming about her own proclivities.

Then,one evening, my phone rang. It was Teresa. "Can you speak?" she asked. With Helping Hands members one never knew so it was proper to be discreet. I assured her I was alone, hoping that she would offer to pop round. That wasn't what was on her mind.

"You asked me once," she said, almost without preamble, "about bisexuality."

"I remember."

"You were fishing to find out if that was my line of country."

"Oh well ..."

"No need to be coy. It was understandable." There was a longish silence. I said nothing, though I was impatient to know where this was leading. Eventually, I heard her take in a deep breath. "This is confidential, isn't it?"

"Isn't it always?"

"Yes, of course it is. I'm sorry.:

"Just tell me what's on your mind."

"Well, I have a very good friend. Billy. Oh, a woman friend. Wilhelmina, really, but everyone calls her Billy. We met at University." Pause. "Where we were ... very close friends. Yes?"

"Go on."

"It was good, but it didn't last. We went our own ways, both got married,kept in touch with Christmas cards, that sort of thing."

Again she stopped, still seemingly uncertain, needing reassurance. I said, "And now Billy is back in your life?" It was the only logical conclusion.

"Yes, up to a point. She's taken to asking if she can visit. Just for a week-end. Every few months. No

more."

"But you are back where you were and it's still good?"

"Yes."

"So you feel perhaps the time has come to part company with - well, you know, a lot of your friends in the village."

"Good heavens, no," she exclaimed. "Cut myself from all that - especially you. Of course not."

"What then?"

"The last time Billy was here we talked about a lot of things. The situation with her husband isn't good. Sex is virtually non-existent. But there are no real grounds for divorce. And anyway, when you pass fifty the lonely life of a divorcee can be frightening."

"Not if you know about Helping Hands."

"Exactly. So I told her ... more or less everything. I know I can trust her and, in any case, she doesn't know the village and the village doesn't know her."

"But - if she divorces him and comes to live here -"

"It's not what she wants, John."

"So what is?"

Another pause, this time longer than before. "Let me put it this way. What Billy and I do together is good. More than good. But what Billy needs is a man."

"I see."

"I'm not sure you do. What Billy has in mind is a threesome. Her, me and a man."

My turn to pause for thought before I asked, "How do you feel about that?"

"The more I've thought about it, the more it appeals."

Not difficult then to see where the conversation was heading. "And you've rung me because - "

"Yes, John."

"Mr Big."

For the first time she giggled. "Not just for that. But it helps. Will you?"

My only question was, "When?"

"This week-end. I know I should have called you before but - well, anyway, I've done it now. You know we'll try to make it good for you, too."

They did.

And, every few months, still do.